



## **Statement from Council of Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation in response to announcement from Yukon Residential Schools and Missing Children Project**

FOR RELEASE September 26, 2023 - Old Crow, Yukon

It is with heavy hearts that we share the news that we received from Yukon Residential Schools and Missing Children Project earlier today that work undertaken to date at the former Chooutla Indian Residential School has identified 33 children who died at Chooutla and 15 potential graves at the site based on anomalies found through ground-penetrating radar work completed in June.

We emphasize that this information does not paint a complete picture in that these numbers may grow as work and research continues, and that the 15 potential grave-sites identified cannot be confirmed or identified without further work. This information comes with many unanswered questions.

Today is another difficult and necessary step towards truth. We are gaining, through the gathering of evidence from stories, research, and science, a greater understanding of what happened to our loved ones that were taken and never returned. We acknowledge that this will reignite the pain and grief that so many of us feel and we encourage everyone to take advantage of the supports that are available this week. Taking care of our mental health as we are triggered is essential. We do not have to face this alone.

The trauma of residential school is a reality we continue to face. We grieve as mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers for the ones who never came home, for the ones who came home and never were the same and for those still carrying the intergenerational and transgenerational trauma.

The Chooutla Indian Residential School was established in 1911 by the Anglican Church and funded by the Government of Canada and, Vuntut Gwitchin children from our families, community and territory were removed and taken to Carcross, as a part of the broader history of colonization of the Yukon which the Vuntut Gwitchin have and continue to endure.

This history includes the 1911-12 occupation of our historic village at Rampart House during the surveying of the international Yukon-Alaska border through our Traditional Territory which left many Vuntut Gwitchin families destitute from the introduction of disease and the burning of their village site, clothing and possessions by the newcomers. Several of these Vuntut Gwitchin families at Rampart House would be among the first to see their children taken to the Chooutla Indian Residential School.

We remember and honour each of these children, and their families. The families who, after learning the horrors of the Chooutla Indian Residential School including the realization that children were not returning without explanation, refused to allow our children to be taken to Carcross for a period of over 20 years, even at risk of breaking the discriminatory laws of Canada that were now being enforced upon our ancestors.

In the days and weeks ahead, our community will need to come together and continue to thoughtfully and respectfully discuss what needs to happen next to bring peace and justice to the children lost, our families and to our community. As a community, we need to continue to support each other, to hold each other up, and to seek help when we need it. It is up to all of us to contribute to healing: to breaking the transmission of



the compound trauma and continuing effects from residential school so that collectively we can continue working towards a better future for our young people where they are loved and cared for and celebrated for who they are.

We commend the leadership, strength and truth that the Yukon Residential Schools and Missing Children Project Working Group showed this morning in delivering this heavy information and that survivors and intergenerational survivors have shown for decades in sharing their experiences.

As we continue to seek the truth of what happened to our loved ones, we do so for each and every citizen of our Nation. We have a long road ahead of us to bring closure and healing to our community but we will walk this road together.

### **Chief Pauline Frost on behalf of Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation**

Supports including grief and trauma counsellors are available and we will be gathering as a community throughout the week:

#### **Tuesday September 26<sup>th</sup>**

Sacred Fire to honour the children lost

5:00PM

Fire outside the Darius Elias Community Hall

#### **Friday September 29<sup>th</sup>**

Community Meeting in Old Crow to discuss the announcement

5:30PM

Darius Elias Community Hall

Dinner will be provided

#### **Saturday September 30<sup>th</sup>**

National Day for Truth and Reconciliation Sacred Fire and Honour Walk

12:00PM

Fire outside the Darius Elias Community Hall

Lunch will be provided

In Whitehorse.

#### **Saturday September 30<sup>th</sup>**

National Day for Trust and Reconciliation hosted by CYFN and Welcome to the Warrior Walkers

1:00PM

Kwanlin Dün Cultural Centre

We acknowledge our Elder Lorraine Netro and all those who is completing the Warrior Walk this week.

The National Indian Residential School Crisis Line can be contacted 24/7 at 1-866-925-4419.